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WHO/Europe recommendations on influenza vaccination during the 2012/2013 winter season

Influenza infection is usually mild and uncomplicated, but may occasionally cause severe disease, particularly among the elderly, pregnant women, very young children and persons with underlying medical conditions. Seasonal influenza vaccination is safe and is the most effective means of preventing infection and severe outcomes caused by influenza viruses.

In the Northern hemisphere, influenza usually causes annual epidemics during autumn and winter, and vaccination is therefore recommended every year before the season begins. Based on the circulating viruses, WHO annually recommends a vaccine composition for the Northern hemisphere, which targets the three strains expected to be the most common and frequently circulating in the coming season. The virus strains recommended for inclusion in the seasonal influenza vaccine in the Northern hemisphere 2012-2013 winter season are:

- A/California/7/2009 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus;
- A/Victoria/361/2011 (H3N2)-like virus;
- B/Wisconsin/1/2010-like virus (Yamagata lineage).

RECOMMENDED TARGET GROUPS FOR VACCINATION

Seasonal vaccination against influenza is safe and can benefit all age groups, but is especially important for people at higher risk of serious influenza complications. Specific population groups may be targeted for vaccination depending on the objectives of the national vaccination programme, documented vaccine effectiveness, access to vaccine, and the ability to implement vaccination campaigns in the targeted groups.

In 2012, WHO published updated recommendations for seasonal influenza vaccination based on a systematic literature review performed by the Strategic Advisory Group of

Experts (SAGE) on immunization.¹ The group reviewed evidence on influenza disease burden, vaccine performance (efficacy and safety), and the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of implementing vaccination programmes for the following population groups: pregnant women, health care workers, elderly, children, and persons with chronic underlying medical conditions.

Based on the review, SAGE recommended that in countries considering initiating influenza vaccine programmes or expanding the target groups to receive vaccination, pregnant women should be given the highest priority. The new recommendations also emphasized the inclusion of children aged 6-59 months in national vaccination programmes for influenza in addition to the traditional target groups (e.g. elderly, chronically ill persons). More detailed information on the new recommendations can be obtained from the SAGE Working Group on Immunization “Background Paper on Influenza Vaccines”².

On the basis of these findings and previous recommendations, Member States should consider the following as priority groups for influenza vaccination³:

- Pregnant women;
- Individuals >6 months with chronic heart or lung diseases, metabolic or renal disease, chronic liver disease, chronic neurological conditions, immunodeficiencies;
- Elderly persons over a nationally defined age limit, irrespective of other risk factors;
- Residents of institutions for older persons and the disabled;
- Children aged 6–59 months;
- Health care workers including those that work in homes that care for older persons or those with disabilities;
- Other groups defined on the basis of national data and resources.

Note: While the target groups for seasonal influenza vaccination in the updated recommendations largely have remained unchanged from the previous recommendations in 2005 and 2009, the new recommendations emphasize the inclusion of pregnant women (any trimester) and children aged 6-59 months in national vaccination programmes for influenza based on substantial evidence on the burden of disease in these groups accumulated since the previous recommendations.

Further information

Questions and Answers for health professionals on seasonal inactivated influenza vaccines. http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/155633/Q-and-A_on_seasonal_inactivated_influenza_vaccines_21-12-2011_FINAL.pdf

¹ Seasonal influenza vaccine, Weekly Epidemiological Record, No. 21, 2012, 87, 201–216 (www.who.int/wer/2012/wer8721.pdf)

² SAGE Background Paper on Influenza Vaccines

www.who.int/immunization/sage/meetings/2012/april/1_Background_Paper_Mar26_v13_cleaned.pdf

³ Priority groups are drawn from the WHO position paper on influenza vaccines (Influenza vaccines. Weekly Epidemiological Record, No. 33, 19 August 2005) and the updated recommendations of SAGE, April, 2012.